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An Information Digest From ERIC/CAPS
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Counseling and Personnel Services

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR: MIDDLE/JUNIOR HIGH LEVEL

School counselor roles seem to have run the gamut: they're all things to all people; they're miracle workers; they're only record-keeping and scheduling clerks; they own the guidance program. When researchers look at role perceptions and actual vs. ideal roles, they find both consensus and conflict (Bonebrake & Borgers, 1984; Helms & Ibrahim, 1985; Ibrahim, Helms, & Thompson, 1983). Variations in role and role perceptions may occur not only between districts and states, but among different groups within a school community and from school to school within a system. Current concerns for accountability and the economic bottom line further complicate attempts at counselor role definition.

Focus of This Digest. This Digest attempts to bring some clarity to the issue by focusing on the definition of the school counselor role at the middle/junior high level. Elementary and high school levels are the subject of separate Digests. In all three, the beginning and concluding sections are the same: the "developmental" role of school counselors, K-12 comprehensive developmental guidance, and counselor role essentials. Additional sections in this Digest cover middle/junior high developmental guidance, the counselor role in middle/junior high guidance, and selected counselor roles (group counseling, peer facilitator programs, and parent education).

Developmental Role of School Counselors. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (1981, 1984a) has defined the role of school counselors as "developmental," an approach based on models of the developmental psychology of children and adolescents, and on planned interventions to assure school-life success. This approach emphasizes a proactive, facilitative counselor role in fostering the learning and growth of all students, as opposed to crisis management, trouble shooting, therapeutic counseling, or advisement for the few. The major areas of developmental need which determine counselor interventions are personal, social, academic and career.

K-12 Comprehensive Developmental Guidance. Counseling leaders regard statewide K-12 comprehensive developmental guidance programs as the most effective way to establish the developmental counselor role. This is broadly defined as providing structured developmental guidance through individual and small group counseling (aimed at both content and process needs); large group guidance (including classroom and curricular guidance); consultation with and inservice training of teachers; consultation with and education of parents; and coordination of related guidance services (ASCA, 1984a; Brown, Lemm, & Peace, 1985). The implications for counselor training include renewed emphases on child and adolescent growth and development, group work, and consultation.

Middle/Junior High Developmental Guidance

Middle or junior high schools are typically characterized as flexible, exploratory and transitional. Effective guidance programs at this level are directed to the developmental stages of emerging adolescents and take into account their rapid, but highly varying rate of change (Cole, 1981). Leading developmental psychologist Erik Erikson has defined the stages for this age as industry vs. inferiority and group identity vs. alienation.

Counselor Role in Middle/Junior High Guidance

Counselor roles in developmental guidance for this level include the following (ASCA, 1981): (1) Through group guidance, peer facilitators and staff inservice, assist students in the transition to greater responsibility for their own learning and personal development. (2) Through teacher inservice, consultation and co-teaching, incorporate developmental units in such curriculum areas as English, social studies, health and home economics. (3) Organize and implement a career guidance program focusing on assessment of students' career maturity and career planning status, access to relevant career information, and assistance in processing the information for school-related decisions.

Selected Counselor Roles

Group Counseling. Group counseling is particularly effective at this level because it provides a comfortable setting for young adolescents, as well as an opportunity to practice communication skills, try out new behaviors, and receive feedback. The focus of group counseling can be developmental issues, which helps reduce the need

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2108 School of Education, The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259 (313) 764-9492

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for crisis counseling when growth and change occur, or specific problems such as divorce or substance abuse (Guillen, 1981; Peters, 1985). Examples of developmental issues include: self-awareness and self-esteem, personal relationships, social skills, questions of conscience and conformity, sexual and sex role behavior, decision making, values clarification, academic performance and study skills, and career/vocational concerns.

Peer Facilitator Programs. The importance of the peer group at this level provides school counselors with a built-in opportunity to develop effective peer facilitator programs (ASCA, 1984b). Studies have demonstrated that students trained in one-to-one and group skills, for both non-academic and academic areas, can produce substantial benefits for their peers as well as themselves. One advantage, though difficult to measure, is that peer facilitators interacting naturally, during "off hours," may contribute to the long-term maintenance of positive changes.

The school counselor's role in peer facilitating is to design, implement and evaluate the program. Specific responsibilities include: devising a peer facilitator selection plan suitable for the population to be served; coordinating or providing peer facilitator training; meeting regularly with peer facilitators for continued training, supervision, sharing and personal growth; monitoring and evaluating both the training and the program; and communicating the results.

Parent Education. Students' growing independence and preoccupation with their peers may mean hard times for parents. School counselors can help considerably by conducting parent education groups (as well as individual conferences) on normal stages of development and specific problems/issues. While a number of prepackaged programs are available, counselors can also develop their own or lead loosely organized discussion groups (Huhn & Zimpfer, 1984). The most effective programs use a behavioral approach and teach communication skills and behavior management.

Additional benefits from such programs are the increased visibility and status of the counselor as an authority in child/adolescent development; the gain in counselor skills and knowledge beyond traditional areas of expertise; and the establishment of the counselor's liaison role between school, home and community.

Counselor Role Essentials

If counselors are to have a realistic and effective role, it is essential to (1) assess local needs and resources, (2) establish priorities and clear objectives, (3) build in evaluation procedures, (4) communicate with the school staff and school community, and (5) work closely with staff members as a cohesive team. Otherwise, counselors are at risk of becoming what they cannot and should not be: miracle workers, sole owners of the guidance program, or the school's administrative catch-all. Ultimately, the guidance program will be only as good as the support that parents and administrators give to it—especially to the role of the counselor as a professional facilitator/educator.

Resource Documents

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Deborah Herbert
Editor, ERIC/CAPS

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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet focuses on the school counselor role at the middle/junior high school level. It discusses the developmental role of school counselors, kindergarten through grade 12 comprehensive developmental guidance, and counselor role essentials. Also included are sections on middle/junior high developmental guidance, the counselor role in middle/junior high guidance, and selected counselor roles. (NB)

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